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Putting politics aside

Lieutenant governor expects Legislature to end bickering

By Katherine K. Lee

City Editor

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TUSCALOOSA | Lt. Gov. Jim Folsom said Tuesday he expected a better spirit of bipartisanship to prevail in this year's legislative session compared to last year.

"If a dictatorship is the most efficient form of government, and democracy is the least efficient, then we've got total democracy in the Senate," he said.

He said that during last year's session the state Senate remained deadlocked, few bills passed and a disagreement between senators literally came to blows. He said it was the first session for a newly-elected Senate, and committee leadership positions had yet to be ironed out.

See video from the event below.

"In organizational sessions, there are aspirants to want to take control, get on committees," he said. "Things got a little out of hand."

Folsom said that legislators had more important issues to deal with in the session that begins Feb. 5. The state is looking at deficits in the general fund and the education trust fund and has to find a way to adequately fund state services.

"We've got some major issues," he told a meeting of the Tuscaloosa Rotary Club on Tuesday. "We have a crisis in funding for education and Medicaid, and it's just not the year to be addressing politics."

He speculated that the upcoming session would be much more

productive than the 2007 session. Since so few bills passed last year, legislators would be more motivated to see their bills pass this year.

"With the budget shortfall, everyone's hoping to go to Montgomery and pass some budgets," he said. "We're going to have to focus and be creative to address these problems, and for that we've got to have bipartisan support and put politics behind us."

He said that in that spirit, redistricting would not be on the agenda for this year's session.

"That's off the table," he said.

With this week's dismal economic news, Folsom said it was imperative that both parties lay aside differences.

"This state relies on consumer taxes so it's a volatile situation here," he said. "In the last few years, we've been flush and our economy has grown. We've kept the

education trust fund and the general fund flush.

"But now we're facing an \$800 million deficit and a \$150 million to \$200 million deficit in Medicaid. If you look at that, we don't need to get into bickering about who's running in 2010."

Folsom said education funding was of paramount concern. He cited the governor's

Pre-K initiative as a program that he supported wholeheartedly but was not being adequately funded.

"That's where your most effective dollars are being spent, in educating kids," he said. "But House and Senate leaders don't know where the dollars going to come from."

Folsom nixed the idea of raising taxes to make up the shortfall.

"Alabamians are just not that comfortable with that scenario," he said. "I'm not advocating an increase in property taxes. We've been down that road a few times and I don't think you'll see any initiative to raise property taxes — or raise taxes at all in Alabama."

Folsom said he refused to be drawn into a discussion on whether he might seek higher office in two years when Riley leaves the governor's office. He said he was focusing his attention on the session. Nor would he speculate on the likely outcome of Alabama's presidential primaries, which will be held the same day the legislative session opens.

"I've had several Democratic campaigns call me to get involved," he said, adding that he had met in person with New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, a frontrunner the party primaries. "But I have not become involved in the primary process."

He said his interest in the race for the presidency lies only in ensuring that whoever was elected would be sympathetic to the state's concerns.